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# 6<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL EDITION

## THE YEAR'S BEST S-F

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY BY

RAY BRADBURY ■ FREDRIC BROWN ■ HENRY SLESAR

KINGSLEY AMIS ■ ARTHUR C. CLARKE ■ HOWARD FAST

ANTHONY BOUCHER ■ ROGER PRICE ■ LESTER DEL REY

ISAAC ASIMOV ■ WALT KELLY ■ AND MANY OTHERS

EDITED BY JUDITH MERRIL





# **6<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL EDITION THE YEAR'S BEST S-F**

**EDITED BY JUDITH MERRIL**

**A DELL BOOK**



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# HEMINGWAY IN SPACE

by Kingsley Amis

from *Punch*

Last year I took occasion to do considerable sniping at some sins of omission, and a few commissions, in Kingsley Amis's critical book on science fiction, "New Maps of Hell." When my first fine fury began to die down, it occurred to me that my fire might better have been aimed at the general literary reviewers (who took the Amis dicta as a sort of newstyle Holy Writ) than at the author, who never claimed infallibility for himself.

One of Mr. Amis's sharpest criticisms of science fantasy in general was the lack of good humorous writing in the field. From the examples he cited, and those he did not, I suspect we do not always laugh at the same jokes. Not always: at least one exception (and probably several more) appeared in the series of parodies published in *Punch* last year, when that venerable institution of humor announced it had ordered "SF stories in the manner of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope . . ." etc.

Mr. Amis's expertise as a critic of s-f was assigned him by reviewers who did not know the science-fantasy field, but did know, and respect (with cause), the author's reputation as a leading "Angry Young Man" novelist and essayist. His expertise as a writer—in this case a superb parodist—is not the property of the reviewers, but very much his own.

The woman watched him and he made another sweep. There was nothing again but he knew one of them was around. It got so you always knew. After twenty years it got so you always knew when one of them was around.

"Anything?"

"Not yet."

"I thought you could tell just where to find these things.



she said. "I thought we hired you because you could take us straight to one of these things. I thought that was why we hired you."

"Easy now, Martha," the young fellow said. "Nobody can find xeeb where there aren't any xeeb, not even Mr. Hardacre. We'll come across one any minute now."

She moved away from the three of them at the instrument panel and her thighs were arrogant under the tight space jeans. You bitch, Philip Hardacre thought suddenly. You goddam, bored, boring, senseless bitch. He felt sorry for the young fellow. He was a pretty nice fellow and here he was married to this goddam senseless bitch and it looked like he was too afraid of her to tell her to get the hell out although you knew he wanted to.

"I feel him near," the old Martian said, turning the bigger and more grizzled of his two heads toward Philip Hardacre. "We shall see him soon now."

The woman leaned against the ship's side and stared out the port. "I can't think why you have to go hunting these monstrosities. Two days it's been since we left and we could have been in Venusport all that while instead of cooped up in this steel jalopy a couple of light years from civilization. What's so good about getting a xeeb even if you do get one? What does it prove, getting a xeeb?"

"The xeeb is the largest life-form in this part of the galaxy." The young fellow was a school professor or something like that and you could tell it from the way he spoke. "More than that its the only sentient creature living out here in free space and it's ferocious, it's been known to take on a scout ship. It's the toughest damn thing there is. That's it, isn't it?"

"That's part of it," Philip Hardacre said. There was that although there was much more, the freedom out there and the stars against the black and the men small in their suits and afraid and yet not afraid and even the xeeb small in the vastness and the cool joy if the xeeb was a good one.

"He comes," the old Martian said in his whistling tones, his smaller head bent toward the screen. "See, lady."

"I don't want to see," she said, turning her back. It was a deadly insult under the ancient Martian code of honor and



she knew it and Philip Hardacre knew she knew it and there was hate in his throat but there was no time now for hate.

He got up from the panel. There was no doubt about it. An amateur could have taken the blip for an asteroid or another ship but after twenty years you knew immediately. "Suit up," he said. "Spaceside in three minutes."

He helped the young fellow with the helmet and what he had been dreading happened, the Martian had taken out his own suit and was stiffly putting his rear pair of legs into it. He went over to him and put his hand between the two necks in the traditional gesture of appeal. "This is not your hunt, Ghlmu," he said in the archiac Martian courtly tongue.

"I am still strong and he is big and he comes fast."

"I know it, but this is not your hunt. Old ones are hunted more than they hunt."

"All my eyes are straight and all my hands are tight."

"But they are slow and they must be quick. Once they were quick but now they are slow."

"Har-dasha, it is thy comrade who asks thee."

"My blood is yours as in all the years, it is only my thought that must seem cruel, old one. I will hunt without you."

"Hunt well, Har-dasha, then. I await you always," the old creature said, using the ritual formula of acquiescence.

"Are we going to shoot this goddam whale or not?" The woman's voice was shrill. "Or are you and that thing going on whistling at each other all night?"

He turned on her savagely. "You're out of this. You're staying right here where you belong. Put that blaster back on the rack and take off that space-suit and start making food. We'll be back in half an hour."

"Don't you give me orders, you bum. I can shoot as well as any man and you won't stop me."

"Around here I say what everybody does and they do it." Over her shoulder he could see the Martian hanging up his suit and his throat went dry. "If you try to get in that air-lock with us we head right back to Venus."

"I'm sorry, Martha, you'll have to do as he says," the young fellow said.

The two big Wyndham-Clarke blasters were ready primed



and he set them both at maximum, while they stood in the airlock and waited for the air to go. Then the outer door slid into the wall and they were out there in the freedom and the vastness and the fear that was not fear. The stars were very cold and it was black between the stars. There were not many stars and the black was vast where there were no stars. The stars and the black together were what gave the freedom. Without the stars or without the black there would not have been the freedom, only the vastness, but with the stars and the black you had the freedom as well as the vastness. The stars were few and the light from them was small and cold and around them there was the black.

He spoke to the young fellow over the suit radio. "Can you see him? Toward that big star with the small companion."

"Where?"

"Look where I'm pointing. He hasn't spotted us yet."

"How does he spot us?"

"Never mind that. Now listen. Each swoop he makes, give him one shot. Just one. Then go forward on your suit jet fast as you can. That confuses him more than lateral movement."

"You told me."

"I'm telling you again. One shot. He homes on your shot. Get ready, he's seen us, he's turning."

The great beautiful phosphorescent shape narrowed as it came head-on to them, then appeared to swell. The xeeb was closing fast, as fast as any he'd known. It was a big, fast xeeb and likely to be a good one. He'd be able to tell for sure after the first swoop. He wanted the xeeb to be a good one for the young fellow's sake. He wanted the young fellow to have a good hunt with a good, big, fast xeeb.

"Fire in about fifteen seconds, then jet," Philip Hardacre said. "And you won't have too long before his next swoop, so be ready."

The xeeb closed and the young fellow's shot arced in. It was too early to be a good shot and it barely flicked the tail end. Philip Hardacre waited as long as he dared and fired toward the hump where the main ganglia were and jetted without waiting to see where he had hit.



It was a good xeeb all right. From the way its phosphorescence had started to pulsate you could tell it had been hit somewhere in the nervous system or what passed for that but within seconds it had turned and begun another great beautiful graceful swoop on the two men. This time the young fellow held his fire a little longer and got in a good shot near the hump and jetted as he had been told. But then the xeeb dropped in the way they did once in a hundred times and xeeb and man were almost on each other. There was nothing for Philip Hardacre to do but empty his Wyndham-Clarke all at once in the hope that the loosing of so much energy would get the xeeb to change its mind and home on him instead. Then he was jetting forward at top speed and calling over the suit radio to make for the ship at once.

"It puffed something at me and I lost my blaster," came the young fellow's voice.

"Make for the ship."

"We won't get there, will we?"

"We can try. You may have damaged him enough with that last shot to slow him down or spoil his sense of direction," Philip Hardacre said. He already knew that it was all over for them. The xeeb was only a few miles above them and beginning to turn for a fresh swoop, moving slower but not slow enough. The ship was above them too in the other direction. This was what you faced every time you hunted xeeb and when it happened at last it was just the end of the hunt and the end of the freedom and the vastness and they would have had to end some time.

There was a long arc of light from the ship and the xeeb was suddenly brighter than ever before for an instant and then the brightness went out and there was nothing there.

The Martian had fallen into a crouching position in the airlock and the third Wyndham-Clarke was still in his pincers. The two men waited for the outer door to close and the air to flood in.

"Why didn't he put on his suit?" said the young fellow.

"There wasn't time. He had about a minute to save us. A Martian suit takes much longer than that to put on."

"What would have got him first, the cold?"



"Airlessness. They respire quickly. Five seconds at most. Just enough to aim and fire." He was quick after all, Philip Hardacre thought.

Inside, the woman was waiting for them. "What happened?"

"He's dead, of course. He got the xeeb."

"Did he have to get himself killed doing it?"

"There was one weapon on board and one place to use it from," Philip Hardacre said. Then his voice went quiet.

"Why are you still wearing your space-suit?"

"I wanted to get the feel of it. And you said to take it off."

"Why couldn't you have taken the gun into the airlock?"

Her eyes went dull. "I didn't know how the lock worked."

"But Ghlmu did. He could have operated it from in here. And you can shoot, or so you said."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry I like," the young fellow said. He didn't sound like a school professor now, or afraid of her. "Sorry brings back that old guy as alive as ever he was, doesn't it? Sorry is about the best I ever heard. And sorry is something else too. Sorry as all hell is how I feel when I drop you off in Venusport and take the shuttle to Earth by myself. You like Venusport, don't you? Well, here's your chance to get lost in it."

Philip Hardacre finished composing the old Martian's limbs and appendages and muttered as much as he knew of the prescribed incantation. "Forgive me," he said.

"Get supper," the young fellow said to the woman. "Right away."

"This was your hunt," Philip Hardacre said to his friend's body.



# "S-F

FANS CAN BE SURE THAT  
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WILL BE JUDITH MERRIL'S ANTHOLOGY...  
HER SIXTH ANNUAL MAKES...A VINTAGE ONE"

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